

Involving Families in Social Marketing: A Tip Sheet for System of Care Communities

Introduction

It is hard to imagine what the world would be like if there were no social change campaigns. Marketing strategies have encouraged people to protect the environment, buckle their seat belts, quit smoking, eat healthy food, and do many other things to protect themselves and the world around them. Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing practices to promote ideas or causes. Instead of persuading people to buy a certain brand of soap or see a hit movie, for example, social marketing can encourage people to support and sustain effective mental health services and supports for children and their families in the communities where they live.¹

Systems of care use social marketing strategies to educate key audiences about mental health for children, youth, and families. Specifically, social marketing strategies are used to:

- Promote social inclusion;
- Raise awareness of mental health needs of children, youth, and families;
- Show that systems of care are effective; and
- Develop support for building and sustaining mental health services and supports.

Benefits of Involving Families in Social Marketing

Families enrich social marketing programs by bringing a strong voice of first-hand experience to many aspects of planning and implementation. Family organizations can contribute their collective experience in advocacy and outreach with diverse audiences.² Families are the best marketers in their own community. As such, involving them as a system of care begins its work—particularly as the social marketing plan is developed, when their impact can be felt—is critical. The plan's chance of success is greatly increased when families play a key role.

Involving families in social marketing:

- Supports the core values and principles of systems of care;
- Is consistent with family-driven and youth-guided care and practice;
- Creates excitement and promotes hope;
- Gives the work credibility (families are most likely to trust information that comes from other family members);

¹ Stroul, B. and Blau, B. *The System of Care Handbook: Transforming Mental Health Services for Children, Youth, and Families*, Chapter 14: Social Marketing, p. 381. (Baltimore, MD: Paul S. Brookes Publishing Co. Inc. 2008).

² Stroul and Blau, p. 390.

- Ensures messages are appealing and meaningful for families;
- Enlivens data with the inclusion of personal stories; and
- Contributes to sustainability of systems of care by connecting data to the family experiences.

What It Takes to Engage Families in Social Marketing

From the very start of their social marketing activities, it is critical for systems of care to involve a variety of families who are receiving services. To make sure there is sufficient family voice at all times, it is necessary to have several family members involved. One member is not enough to ensure diverse perspectives are represented! Social marketing with families requires building relationships, taking care of basic needs, training, and communication.

Strategies for building relationships include:

- Work with families to clearly define roles and help everyone understand them;
- Develop an agreement together about how to involve families in activities;
- Get acquainted with local family organizations and support groups. Ask for a chance to talk with them about social marketing;
- Value family input;
- Respect and value the priorities of different family organizations;
- Seek out, respect, and value the diverse identities and backgrounds of families in your community; and
- Provide validation and appreciation for individual family members and family organizations.

Strategies for meeting basic needs include:

- Begin by asking families what their basic needs are;
- Provide child care or dependent care when needed;
- Assist with transportation by arranging for carpooling, gas reimbursement, parking, taxi vouchers, or bus tokens; and holding meetings close to public transportation;
- Hold meetings at times families can attend—hold both a day and an evening meeting if necessary to accommodate family schedules;
- Offer families fair and reasonable compensation for their time and expertise;
- Provide beverages, snacks, or full meals if the meeting is held during typical meal times;
- Try using technologies such as Web conferencing, e-mail, and conference calls to eliminate the need for face-to-face meetings; and
- Schedule phone call breaks during meetings—provide phones, phone cards, or cell phones so families can be reached or reach others in case of emergencies.

Strategies for training include:

- Train families in social marketing so they can be knowledgeable and skillful partners;
- Prepare social marketers and families to work in partnership together;
- Train families on new technologies to facilitate better/easier participation in social marketing activities;

- Train families as co-trainers to talk about and promote systems of care in their community; and
- Coach families on how to tell their story and be effective public speakers.

Strategies for communication include:

- Share information with families in formats they can use and understand;
- Use as little “jargon” as possible and educate families about the vocabulary and strategies of social marketing when necessary;
- Enlist family members to recruit others;
- Promote the importance of family involvement in social marketing within a system of care and work to sustain it;
- Rely on family members and family organizations to locate other families in their community and identify the best communication channels for reaching them; and
- Keep family members up to date when they have not been able to attend a meeting or activity.

Examples of Success

Social marketing has proven to be an important tool for system of care communities as they work to understand the mental health needs of thousands of children, youth, and families.³ Families have contributed to this success by partnering in planning events and activities, developing materials, honoring and celebrating successes, presenting testimony, and facilitating trainings.

Some examples of activities are:

- Planning conferences;
- Creating family-friendly environments at events;
- Conducting discussion groups;
- Recruiting family spokespeople; and
- Planning and participating in National Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day activities.

Some examples of materials development are:

- Reviewing and contributing content for coloring books, calendars, journals, and other outreach materials;
- Assisting with developing a “growth chart” for young children that defines developmental milestones;
- Writing a family column in their local system of care newsletter;
- Recruiting families for photos, quotes for brochures, television commercials; and
- Writing content for brochures.

Some examples of honoring and celebrating are:

- Creating and implementing award programs to honor agencies, professionals, families, and youth; and
- Planning a luncheon to celebrate the system of care community’s success.

³ Stroul and Blau, p. 397.

Some examples of presenting and facilitating are:

- Facilitating and co-facilitating focus groups;
- Conducting workshops at conferences;
- Setting up speakers bureaus; and
- Presenting to the state legislature and other decision makers.